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## **KERRY VISITS IRAQ TO DISCUSS UPCOMING ELECTIONS WITH V CORPS, ARMY, STATE DEPARTMENT AND IRAQI LEADERS**

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**KIRKUK, Iraq** — Just two months after the U.S. presidential elections, former presidential candidate Sen. John Kerry came here January 6 for discussions with V Corps and other Army, U.S. State Department and provincial Iraqi leaders.

Kerry came here to get a better understanding of the political and security issues in Kirkuk Province as part of Iraq's first democratic elections, slated for Jan. 30.

The senator attended two meetings during his short visit. The first meeting, he discussed security and political issues with Brig. Gen. John W. Morgan III, assistant division commander for maneuver for V Corps' 1st Infantry Division; Brig.

Gen. Alan Gayhart, 116th Brigade Combat Team commander; Col. Lloyd Miles, commander of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team of the 25th Infantry Division, and Peter Thompson, U.S. State Department regional director in Kirkuk.

Kerry's second meeting was with local Iraqi leaders who represent the various ethnic and religious groups of Kirkuk Province.

The main topic of both discussions was the upcoming Iraqi national and provincial elections.

Even though multinational forces will be not be directly involved in Iraq's election process, Army units will work jointly with the Iraqi security forces in protecting Iraqis from terrorists and insurgents as they cast their ballots.

With a potential election boycott by political parties from both the Kurdish and Sunni Arab groups looming, Kerry spent the second meeting talking to their representatives and other Iraqi politicians from the Kirkuk area about the effects of sitting out on these elections.

Some Kurdish and Sunni Arab politicians want to postpone Iraq's elections because of concerns about the ongoing security issues in the province and country.

Kerry countered the proposed boycotts by asking those leaders how the security situation would improve in the following months if the Iraqi government were to grant a postponement. He voiced concerns that a potential security lapse could occur if the country's majority Arab Shia were denied the opportunity to participate in the scheduled January 30 elections.

The senator said he would personally address the issues raised by the Kurdish and Sunni Arab groups with U.S. Ambassador to Iraq John Negroponte. The senator's bottom-line message to the Iraqi politicians was that if they do not participate in the legislative elections later this month, they would not have a voice in the country's new democratic government.

On January 30, Iraqi voters will elect a 275-member Transitional National Assembly. That body will put together a draft constitution that will go undergo a national referendum in October. If the constitution is approved, the plan calls for elections of a permanent Iraqi government in December.

On the same day as national elections, voters from Kirkuk will also elect a 41-member provincial council. One of these elected members will be chosen as the next governor of the Kirkuk Province.

Kerry also traveled to Fallujah and Mosul to assess security and political conditions.

